

Cuban Ship Attacks Draw U.S. Warning And Pentagon Alert

From News Dispatches

The State Department said yesterday the United States would take whatever measures are necessary to protect American citizens from attacks similar to those made by Cuba on two Panamanian freighters this month.

Departmental spokesman Robert J. McCloskey said, "The United States government considers these armed attacks upon commercial vessels . . . to constitute a clear and present threat to the freedom of navigation and commerce in the Caribbean and a threat to American citizens.

"Such threats are intolerable. The United States government is prepared to take all measures under international law to protect U.S. citizens and the freedom of the seas against these attacks in this area."

Shortly after the State Department issued its warning, Pentagon spokesman Daniel Z. Henkin said, "We have initiated certain precautionary measures so that the Department of Defense would be prepared, if necessary, to carry out the policies expressed in the statement issued by the State Department . . . concerning protection of U.S. citizens in the Caribbean area."

Military Alerted

Pentagon sources indicated U.S. air and naval units were being alerted. The United States has jet fighter units and warships based in such places as Cherry Point N.C., Jacksonville, Fla., and the Guantanamo Naval Base on the eastern tip of Cuba.

However, there was no word of any actual ship or plane movements.

The Pentagon's and State Department's statements followed Cuba's declaration yes-

terday that it would not "take a single backward step" and that President Nixon's demand for the release of a captive American sea captain would be "flatly rejected."

Havana Radio, quoting an editorial in the government-controlled newspaper, Granma, answered the Nixon demand in a broadcast.

President Nixon met Thursday with the wife and children of Capt. Jose Villa, 55, skipper of the cargo ship, Johnny Express, which was strafed and seized by two Cuban gunboats in international waters Wednesday about 120 miles off Cuba.

Although the 235-foot ship is of Panamanian registry, Villa is a naturalized U.S. citizen. There were 13 more crewmen aboard and several of them, including Villa, apparently were wounded in the machine-gun and hand grenade attack.

The Fidel Castro government claimed the 1,400-ton vessel was a "private ship" being used by the Central Intelligence Agency.

The White House denounced the seizure and said such an act "cannot be tolerated by the international community."

The White House yesterday underscored Mr. Nixon's determination to win Villa's freedom by saying: "We have made vigorous protest to the government of Cuba and have undertaken strong diplomatic efforts to secure the release of the captain."

Aid Attacked Ships

McCloskey would not elaborate on the specific meaning of his prepared statement, but he indicated it could mean sending aid to American or foreign ships reported under attack.

The Cubans seized the Lylia Express Dec. 5 and its sister ship Dec. 15, claiming both had engaged in carrying arms and anti-Cuban agents.

Asked to comment on these charges, McCloskey said "I can assure you neither vessel has any connection with the United States government." He added that in these instances neither ship was carrying arms or agents to Cuba.

Cuba, in the Granma editorial, said: "The hysterical statements and shouting of the U.S. government will not make the Cuban people take a single step backward in their determination to face the aggressors on whatever ground is necessary."

"Nixon, the Pentagon, the CIA and other imperialist heirarchs and lackeys are abundantly aware of this. Nixon's demands, blackmail and threats will be flatly rejected."